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THE CRISIS OF ATTENTION: UNDERSTANDING THE DECLINE OF DEEP READING AMONG YOUNG LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT :

Reading is a fundamental educational activity that develops language, knowledge, imagination, critical thinking and intellectual independence. However, many young learners are finding it increasingly difficult to remain engaged with lengthy and complex texts. Although young people encounter written material regularly, their reading is often brief and focused on immediate information rather than sustained understanding. This paper examines the decline of deep reading among young learners and explores its major causes and educational consequences. A qualitative conceptual and narrative-review approach was adopted using relevant scholarly literature and educational reports on reading literacy, reading motivation and reading for pleasure. The review indicates that declining reading for pleasure, examination-oriented education, limited choice of reading materials, competing activities and negative reading experiences may contribute to weaker engagement with sustained reading. Reduced deep reading can affect comprehension, vocabulary development, critical thinking and perspective-taking. The paper argues that the issue should not be understood simply as a decline in reading but as a decline in opportunities for sustained attention to complex texts. It recommends protected reading time, student choice, reading communities, explicit teaching of deep-reading strategies and greater family involvement. The paper concludes that deep reading should be recognised as an essential educational capability for developing thoughtful, independent and critically aware learners.

Keywords: Deep reading, Attention, Young learners, Reading for pleasure, Reading comprehension, Reading motivation, Critical thinking.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the foundations of education. It enables learners to acquire knowledge, develop language, understand different perspectives and participate effectively in academic and social life. Reading literacy involves more than recognizing words; it includes understanding, evaluating, reflecting on and engaging with texts for different purposes (OECD, 2023).

However, concerns about young people's reading habits have increased in recent years. Young learners continue to encounter written material, but much of their reading is short and purpose-driven. This raises an important distinction between *reading frequently* and *reading deeply*.

Deep reading refers to sustained and reflective engagement with a text. It requires concentration, interpretation, inference, connection of ideas and critical evaluation. It becomes particularly important when students read literature, academic texts, essays and other complex materials.

The OECD's reading framework emphasizes that higher-level reading requires readers to integrate information, make inferences and reflect critically on texts (OECD, 2023). Therefore, the ability to remain attentive to a complex text is an important component of successful learning.

This paper examines the crisis of deep reading among young learners, identifies factors contributing to it, discusses its consequences and suggests educational strategies for strengthening sustained reading.

2. CONCEPT OF DEEP READING

Deep reading is an active process of constructing meaning from a text. A deep reader does not simply search for information but considers the writer's purpose, connects ideas, identifies implications and evaluates arguments.

It involves:

- sustained attention;
- interpretation and inference;
- connecting ideas;
- questioning assumptions;
- critical evaluation; and
- reflection.

This differs from scanning, where a reader quickly searches for particular information. Both forms of reading are useful, but learners need to know when each approach is appropriate. Academic and literary texts often require slower and more reflective reading. Deep reading therefore represents not simply a reading technique but a form of *intellectual engagement* with written language.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Reading for Pleasure

Reading for pleasure is closely connected with positive attitudes towards reading. It allows learners to experience books as sources of enjoyment, imagination and discovery rather than only as academic requirements.

Research suggests that reading for pleasure is associated with academic, linguistic, social and emotional benefits. Webber (2024) found that adolescents' reading experiences are influenced by access to books, personal interests, school experiences, social factors and competing activities.

The National Literacy Trust's 2024 survey of more than 76,000 children and young people found that only 34.6% of 8–18-year-olds enjoyed reading in their free time, while only 20.5% reported reading something daily in their free time. These were among the lowest levels recorded by the organization since it began measuring these indicators (Clark et al., 2024).

These findings suggest that the challenge involves not only reading ability but also motivation and engagement.

3.2 Reading and Achievement

Reading for enjoyment is also related to academic development. OECD evidence has reported a positive association between reading enjoyment and reading performance (OECD, 2019).

Extended reading provides opportunities to encounter new vocabulary, complex sentence structures and different forms of argument. Regular engagement with such texts can strengthen comprehension and language development.

Thus, reading for pleasure should not be considered separate from academic learning. It can support the development of skills required for academic success.

3.3 Barriers to Reading

Adolescents may face several barriers to reading, including lack of suitable books, limited choice, negative school experiences and competing demands on time. Webber (2024) found that these factors influence young people's willingness to read for pleasure.

This challenges the assumption that students simply do not like reading. Their reading behavior may instead be shaped by the environment in which reading takes place.

4. RESEARCH GAP

Previous research has examined reading motivation, reading for pleasure, reading achievement and changing reading habits. However, these areas are often discussed separately.

There is a need to connect reading motivation with *sustained attention*. A learner may encounter considerable amounts of written information while having limited opportunities to engage deeply with one complex text.

This paper addresses this gap by examining deep reading as a combination of *attention, comprehension, reflection and motivation*. It views the issue not merely as a decline in reading but as a possible decline in opportunities for sustained engagement with texts.

5. OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the concept and importance of deep reading.
2. To identify factors contributing to declining engagement with sustained reading.
3. To examine the consequences of reduced deep reading.
4. To understand the role of reading for pleasure.
5. To suggest strategies for promoting deep reading among young learners.

6. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is deep reading and why is it important?
2. What factors contribute to declining sustained reading among young learners?
3. How can reduced deep reading affect comprehension and critical thinking?
4. What role does reading for pleasure play in reading development?
5. What educational strategies can strengthen deep reading?

7. METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a *qualitative conceptual and narrative-review approach*. No primary survey or experimental data are claimed. The study draws on scholarly literature and educational reports concerning reading literacy, reading motivation, reading for pleasure and reading comprehension.

The literature was examined thematically under four areas: changing reading practices, reading motivation, consequences of reduced deep reading and educational strategies. This approach was selected to develop an evidence-informed understanding of the problem without presenting unsupported primary findings.

8. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DECLINE OF DEEP READING

8.1 Fragmented Attention

Deep reading requires continuity of attention. When learners frequently move between different activities, maintaining concentration on a lengthy text can become difficult. The issue should not be interpreted as evidence that every young person has a permanently reduced attention span. Rather, learners need regular opportunities to practice sustained attention.

8.2 Declining Reading for Pleasure

The reduction in voluntary reading is an important concern. When reading is primarily associated with homework and examinations, students may lose intrinsic motivation. The National Literacy Trust's recent findings demonstrate a substantial decline in reading enjoyment among young people (Clark et al., 2024).

8.3 Examination-Oriented Reading

In examination-focused environments, students may concentrate on summaries, notes and expected questions instead of reading complete texts. Such practices may assist short-term examination preparation but can reduce opportunities for interpretation and independent thinking. Reading can consequently become an activity of *finding answers rather than exploring ideas*.

8.4 Limited Choice and Access

Students are more likely to read when they can access materials that match their interests and reading levels. Limited libraries, unsuitable books and insufficient student choice can discourage voluntary reading.

8.5 Negative Reading Experiences

Constant testing, difficult texts without adequate support and fear of making mistakes can create negative associations with reading. A supportive environment is therefore essential for developing positive reading habits.

9. CONSEQUENCES OF REDUCED DEEP READING

9.1 Weak Complex Comprehension

Deep reading helps learners connect information, identify implicit meanings and understand complex arguments. Higher-level reading requires inference, integration and reflection (OECD, 2023). Limited practice with lengthy texts may therefore make complex comprehension more difficult.

9.2 Reduced Critical Thinking

Deep reading encourages learners to question assumptions, evaluate evidence and compare perspectives. When reading is limited to information retrieval, students may have fewer opportunities to practice these analytical skills.

9.3 Limited Vocabulary Development

Extended reading exposes learners to new vocabulary and varied language structures. Reduced engagement with long-form texts can consequently limit opportunities for language development.

9.4 Reduced Perspective-Taking

Literary reading allows learners to encounter experiences and perspectives different from their own. Research on reading for pleasure has identified connections between reading and social and emotional development, including perspective-taking (Webber, 2024).

9.5 Academic Impact

Reading is required across academic disciplines. Students need to understand textbooks, instructions, examination questions and academic materials. Weak sustained comprehension can therefore affect learning beyond language classrooms.

10. STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING DEEP READING

10.1 Protected Reading Time

Schools should provide regular periods for sustained reading without immediate testing. A short daily reading period can gradually develop reading stamina and concentration.

10.2 Student Choice

Students should be given meaningful choices about what they read. Novels, biographies, poetry, essays, short stories and appropriate nonfiction can be included according to learners' interests.

10.3 Explicit Deep-Reading Strategies

Teachers should teach learners how to read deeply through strategies such as predicting, questioning, annotating, identifying main ideas, making connections, summarizing and evaluating arguments.

10.4 Reading Communities

Book clubs, literature circles and peer discussions can make reading more engaging. Students can recommend books and discuss different interpretations without every activity being assessed.

10.5 Family Involvement

Parents can support reading by providing access to books and discussing reading informally. Reading should not always be followed by testing; conversations about ideas, characters and personal responses can encourage enjoyment.

10.6 Teacher as Role Model

Teachers can influence students' attitudes by sharing their enthusiasm for books and recommending appropriate reading materials. This can help students understand that reading is a lifelong activity rather than merely an examination requirement.

11. DISCUSSION

The literature indicates that the decline of deep reading is a multidimensional educational issue. Reading motivation, access to books, school experiences, examination pressure and competing activities can influence sustained reading.

Importantly, young learners should not be described as incapable of deep reading. Deep reading is a capability that develops through *practice, motivation and opportunity*.

Schools should therefore avoid responding simply by assigning more reading. Instead, they should create meaningful reading experiences in which students have access to suitable texts, opportunities for choice and time for reflection.

The educational goal should be a *balanced reading culture*. Learners need to read efficiently when searching for information but also slow down when analyzing literature, academic arguments or complex ideas.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Introduce regular sustained-reading periods in schools.
2. Increase student choice in reading materials.
3. Encourage reading for pleasure alongside prescribed texts.
4. Teach deep-reading strategies explicitly.
5. Strengthen school and classroom libraries.
6. Establish book clubs and literature circles.
7. Encourage family reading and discussion.
8. Reduce excessive testing of recreational reading.
9. Encourage teachers to act as reading role models.

10. Conduct empirical studies on deep-reading habits among Indian learners.

13. CONCLUSION

The crisis of deep reading is fundamentally a challenge of sustained attention, motivation and reading culture. Young people continue to encounter written language, but their opportunities for prolonged engagement with complex texts may be decreasing.

Deep reading remains important because it supports comprehension, vocabulary, critical thinking, interpretation and perspective-taking. Evidence concerning declining reading enjoyment suggests that schools and families need to create stronger opportunities for voluntary and meaningful reading.

The solution is not to blame young learners or reject changing reading practices. Instead, education should help students understand when to read quickly and when to read slowly, when to locate information and when to analyse it, and when to seek an answer and when to question the text.

Protected reading time, student choice, supportive classrooms, reading communities and explicit instruction can help rebuild reading stamina. In an information-rich world, the ability to concentrate on a complex text is not an outdated skill; it is an essential form of intellectual independence. Deep reading should therefore remain a central priority of contemporary education.

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